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Discomforts, opposition and resistance in schools: The perspectives of union representatives

Abstract

This paper draws on case studies of four English schools to explore some of the ways in which trade union representatives in these schools see their roles and the role of their unions in relation to how policy gets done in their schools. The paper attempts two things: it details and describes some discomforts, oppositions and resistances that are evident in these schools in relation to some of the educational reforms and policy imperatives that are in play. Second, the paper connects these empirical instances to an understanding of resistance that embraces subtlety, contingency and contradiction, as well as the elision of accommodations and resistances that can occur, in order to trouble what is sometimes taken as ‘a high level of compliance amongst teachers’ in neoliberal times’.

Introduction

This paper draws on an ESRC funded project, ‘Policy enactments in the secondary school: theory and practice’, (RES 042 23 1484) which was conducted between October 2008 and April 2011. In the project we were concerned with the ‘diverse and complex ways in which sets of education policies were being ‘made sense of’, mediated and *struggled* over and sometimes ignored’ in schools (Ball, et al., 2012, 3). In the process of doing this research we presented aspects of the work at conferences and seminars and one question occurred in nearly every session, ‘was there any evidence of acts of resistance to the various policies that were being enacted? Or were teachers essentially compliant with the policy reforms they were faced with?’ Many of our questioners spoke of incidents of challenge and resistance that they had found either in their own research or in their own schools and were sceptical about our limited findings in this area. Many almost seemed to want us to detail some account of a Foucaultian ‘great refusal’ (1976) and were disappointed when we were not able to produce this. We had found some evidence of opposition to some policies, but not that much. We identified these as ‘discontents, murmurings, indifference and disengagements - what Goffman calls ‘role distancing’- that is, some ‘disdainful detachment of the performer from a role he (sic) is performing’ (Goffman, 1961, 110)’ (Ball, et al., 2012, 149-150).

In this paper we want to ‘return’ to ‘the persistent sociological question of the relationship between power, agency and the space for alternatives’ (Ball, et al. 2012, 149). We want to reconsider our arguments about oppositional relations to policy in our case study schools. Opposition may not be the right word or concept, and we certainly do not intend to suggest a single or simple relation between commitment and practice - discomforts may more accurately describe teachers’ responses in navigating policies with which they are in some disagreement but with which they may have to comply. We start with a brief

consideration of some of the complexities in thinking about resistance and resistance theory in relation to the work of teachers. Then we concentrate on the perspectives and experiences of one category of policy actor that we have identified as ‘critics’; those who monitor and critique management techniques or who maintain counter-discourses (Ball, et al., 2012, 61). In our work union representatives (reps) fell into this category. Within this category we focus particularly on the perspectives of union representatives (reps) as their involvement in workplace organising and the defence of public education (Stevenson, 2015) makes them especially well placed to provide accounts of any discomforts, oppositions and resistances taking place in their schools. Finally, we return to a discussion of teacher resistance in schools as well as the need for a more complex lexicon that traces the ambivalences and ambiguities that are involved in enacting and opposing education policy.

Theorising resistance

Vinithagen and Johansson (2013, 12) explain that, ‘besides agreeing that resistance is oppositional activity, the literature on resistance differs in the meaning of the concept, at the same time as the theoretical understandings and empirical scope varies tremendously’. For example, in settings where there are overt attempts to destabilise and replace oppressive state regimes and challenge state brutality (the Arab Spring uprisings for example) or to challenge capitalism’s global hegemony (the Greek revolts against austerity), resistances take the form of activist and collective attempts at change where violence and death can be experienced by subalterns (Caygill, 2015). In these strong forms, resistance involves ‘conscious, political and directed actions’ (Raby, 2005, 157). Yet, this does not mean that less politicised and less overt attempts to act back against oppression are not resistance too. As hooks and West (1991) have detailed, resistances can be ‘thick’ and ‘thin’; thick resistances challenge major structures and thin resistances are typically located in more everyday micro-political interactions. Perspectives that begin with a view of power as dispersed and pervasive are particularly helpful for making sense of thin or everyday resistances (Foucault 1976/1998). This involves a re-focusing of the analysis of power from will and might, the ‘great machineries of power’, to circulation and relations, from the sovereign and the state, to ‘the delicate mechanisms of power’ (Foucault, 2003, 33) that work in and through apparatuses of knowledge and truth, from law to normalization – all of which is founded on a recognition that power itself has a history.

Thus alongside macro-political forms of resistance studies, what Bhabha (1984) terms a ‘spectacular’ form, an additional strand of resistance studies has documented the various ways in which the subaltern speaks back to power in less obvious and direct ways – ‘thin’ forms of resistance. Chau (2011, 179) talks of sets of ‘practices imbued with a logic that transforms them into acts of resistance’. These practices could include the use of humour (Vinithagen and Johansson 2013). However, Giroux’s (1983) critique of resistance theory warns that not all oppositional behaviour is resistance and that some oppositional behaviour may, in practice, have oppressive outcomes. In our school-based work, in the meetings that we attended, humour was regularly evident.

Teachers were sarcastic or sceptical about, and sometimes bemused and flabbergasted by, aspects of policy reforms mandated by central government or concocted by their own senior leaders. But do such emotional responses constitute resistance, or at least a mild form of resistance within forms of accommodation, particularly in relation to those policies mandated by the government that have to be enacted?

The term ‘everyday resistance’ was introduced some time ago by Scott (1985) to explain tactics that people use to ‘survive and undermine repressive domination, especially in contexts when rebellion is too risky’ (Vinthagen and Johansson, 2013, 1). Scott (1985; 2005, 392) talks about ‘disguised forms of struggle amidst overt compliance’, in the form of local but nonetheless important ‘resistance that covers its tracks’ (p. 404). He gives examples such as foot-dragging, avoidance and passivity and ‘calculated conformity’. It could be argued that taking such an inclusive approach to what constitutes resistance dilutes the meaning of resistance and underplays the distinctive significance of more strategic and focused forms of oppositional action. Arguably, within this conceptualisation almost everything becomes resistance! On the other hand, one benefit is that this wider construction allows for more recognition of the contingent and complex nature of how teachers experience, attempt to deal with, and perhaps subvert, aspects of the contemporary policy landscape they encounter in their everyday lives.

In trying to detail instances of discomfort, resistances and oppositions in our school-based study, there were and are at least two key problems. One is how to recognise these instances in the field; personal unease is not always evident to or shared with researchers or even between teachers themselves. There are however, some moments of disquiet, refusals, unease and even rage perhaps, that contribute towards an ‘opening up (of) spaces of doubt’ (Ball and Olmedo, 2013, 93) that do become more evident and it is such moments that constitute the focus of our analysis here. A second problem lies in classifying what is and is not resistance and Ball (2015) has shown how refusal operates as an important form of everyday resistance. Through drawing on written testimonies of different teachers, he illustrates the ways that they engage in transgressive acts of refusing to be those teachers that are being conjured up in neo-liberal regimes of high-stakes accountability regimes and rigorous public scrutiny. As Ball (2015, 3) argues:

The individual is the site of power, where it is enacted or resisted/refused (Mills 2003); but never in an absolute sense, rather within multiple ‘strategic skirmishes’. The issue is one of a recognition of and engagement with relations of power.

Perhaps the use of humour and other emotional responses are thus best seen as struggles against and refusals of the dominant forms of the teacher that is inscribed in policy. It may also be the case as Connell (2009) argues, that in a context where accountability and performance demands are driven by external forces, there may be far less scope for large-scale forms of critique and opposition. Thus, in this paper we take another look at our interviews with one key set of policy actors- the teacher union representatives -in order to think

again about the unease, discomforts and any oppositional relations to policy in our schools.

The study

The study was set in four co-educational, non-denominational and non-selective secondary schools selected for their ‘ordinary’ profiles (Maguire, et al., 2011) – for example, with regard to league tables of examination results, performing at around the national average at the time of our data collection. The sample included Atwood School, a community school in central London; two schools in suburban education authorities, George Eliot and Wesley School; and Champion School, located in a small county town. (All these school names, and the names of our respondents, are pseudonyms). Over the two-and-a-half-year period of the project’s duration, we collected documentary evidence and observed training sessions and briefings where policy was disseminated and reworked. We conducted 95 semi-structured interviews with head teachers, senior management, class teachers, union representatives and support and advisory staff. In analysing this large data set we drew on a range of theoretical resources including Foucault’s work on discourse and governmentality, some actor-network theory, policy analysis and the substantive work of Spillane (2004) on teacher’s sense-making. Overall, we approached the data on the basis that ‘individuals bring their own experiences, scepticisms, and critiques to bear on what they see/read/are exposed to and will read policies from positions of their identities and subjectivities’ (Ball, 2012, 15).

For the purposes of this paper, we have returned to four in-depth interviews with the union reps conducted in each school (see Table 1). In this paper we concentrate on the perspectives of the reps as we would realistically expect to be able to gather more accounts of any oppositional activity from these teachers –not all resistance comes courtesy of the Union but hopefully it is a good place to start! We had used semi-structured interview techniques to ensure we covered our major concerns about how policies were enacted in schools while allowing space for participant insights and observations to emerge. We had asked the reps about their work in the school as subject teachers as well as union representatives, about what they saw as policy imperatives, what teachers were concerned about and were raising with them in their role as union reps, as well as how teachers and reps attempted to cope with and deal with those policies that caused them discomforts and anxieties. For the analysis presented here, we wanted to reconsider our arguments about oppositional relations to policy in our case study schools. We therefore returned to the rep’s interview transcripts using a system of open-coding to reconsider and re-analysis their accounts specifically from the perspective of tracing out any discomforts or other responses to policy work in their schools based on Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis of generating initial codes, searching and reviewing themes and finally categorising and naming them. This process included highlighting any data in the four transcripts that reflected instances of thick resistance or thin (i.e. everyday) resistances or refusals.

Table 1 (goes here)

Trade Unionism in English Schools

In English schools, there are a number of different unions and professional associations that represent the interests of organised teachers and headteachers. In secondary schools, at the time of our data collection, the unions with the largest memberships were the National Union of Teachers (NUT); the National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) and the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) – the NUT and ATL merged to form the National Education Union in September 2017. There are other smaller unions and associations that have much lower membership rates and density in schools. Teachers tend to join unions in their pre-service training, sometimes as a form of legal protection – teaching is an occupation that is stressful, where workers can be vulnerable to false allegations and so union membership and the legal support that unions provide, are seen as a sensible form of ‘insurance’. If individuals do not join a union when they are in training (when it is free to join all the unions) they tend to join a union in their first school or, sometimes, will join a union if things start to go ‘wrong’ in their career. Some trainee teachers join the union as a means of participating in collective action to protect teacher’s pay and conditions and defend public education.

Although there has been some overall decline in trade union membership in England, many public sector workers (in health, social service work, the civil service, education) still see trade unionism as part of their organisational and workforce culture. Government statistics (2011) reveal that more than sixty per cent of public sector workers belong to a trade union ([http:// www.bis.gov.uk: policies/employment-matters/research/trade-union-stats](http://www.bis.gov.uk:policies/employment-matters/research/trade-union-stats)Government). This percentage is even higher for teachers; one NFER study found that 97% of teachers surveyed reported belonging to a union (Ager and Pyle, 2013). In our four schools, the reps detailed high levels of membership, reporting that between seventy and more than eighty percent plus of all teachers were union members. In each of our four schools, while some of the members were not active and did not attend union meetings on a regular basis, all the reps said they could count on a small core of up to ten members who would ensure that information was passed round as quickly as possible so that at the department level, members were kept up-to-date with trade union developments. These networks also ensured that union reps were kept aware of any tensions, or emerging conflicts, in different parts of their schools.

How the reps see their role and the role of their union

In our interviews, it was evident that all four reps saw their roles, and that is their unions, in similar ways, as fulfilling a need for representation and advocacy on behalf of the relatively powerless with the relatively (at least within the context of the school) powerful, and more generally, looking after the membership and protecting teachers. ‘And I think that’s the whole purpose

of a union, is to have a voice through a spokesperson that isn't specifically you'. (Neil)

There were differences of opinions between the reps and some senior managers about whether the role of the union was to represent concerns of the membership or take a more pro-active stance, or both. For example, Neil described

... one confrontation with a member of the senior management team who was angry with me because I sent round an email asking what people thought on an issue and she didn't think that that was the way that the union should be run. She felt I was stirring up trouble rather than waiting for people to come to me with things. But I thought it was the only way to gauge what people thought on a particular issue. (Neil)

Three of the reps said that members were sometimes frightened to raise concerns or to register their unwillingness to enact particular policies. What Stewart said encapsulates such disquiets: 'People keep their gobs shut and they hope that either things will go away or things will get sorted out or [they think] it's just me or, you know, it's if I make a fuss it'll cause problems for myself.' Sometimes they represented individuals in meetings dealing with specific issues; other times they advocated for wider systemic changes that would make life more manageable for their members.

I don't think people like to be seen to be making waves. And as a union rep a) you take that on board but also I think you have a certain sort of position which is protected, it's understood that you are going to be the person who comes with difficulties (to the head). But I suppose also we do encourage the idea that collectively if there is a problem we would like to know about it so that we can go along and talk to the head collectively. (Dave)

Going beyond working as teacher advocates and taking a lead and being pro-active about school-specific issues, trade union reps also see their role as organising and building campaigns that link to national union campaigns to improve the working conditions of teachers, and challenging policies and practices that they see as damaging to state education. They can, in addition, play a critical role in educating teachers about the need to defend their interests.

Neil argued that while teachers did not respond well to questionnaires from the head or the senior managers, he found it helpful to use quick surveys to gauge the feelings of teachers and to muster support in tackling in-school issues. This was the case in all four schools where questionnaires or email surveys were regularly deployed by union reps. By using evidence of opposition to changes that were being proposed by senior leaders, reps were sometimes able to pre-empt and curtail aspects of policy reforms in their schools before they were rolled out. This type of pre-emptive action can function to damp down more overt forms of resistance.

We're not doing Learning Conversations.... (mentoring students about their learning) I just put a questionnaire to everyone and said, you know, do you understand them, do you understand what they're about, do you have enough time, when do you do them, you know. And people said, generally they thought they were a good idea but that they didn't have the time... So it was one of, like many initiatives, people think it's a good thing to do but it's about being given the resources to do it properly. (Stewart)

As a result of this opposition, Atwood School's senior management decided not to enact this policy and thus, any potential discomfort or conflict was avoided. What we see here is a 'smart' way of not complying with an initiative that would add more work, while seemingly approving of the policy itself – a form of resistance within accommodation and a practical way of ensuring that teachers do not become overloaded with delivering policies that are not mandated by government, but that are being proposed by senior managers in their school.

Issues, oppositions and resistance

Union reps are generally in a good position to comment on the concerns of their members; the reps reported that individual teachers regularly discuss difficulties with them. Dealing with individual concerns (case work) can take up a lot of time and all four reps reported that it was important to give support and information to members, not just in terms of protecting their interests but also, more pragmatically, in terms of holding onto the membership. The reps attend staff meetings and are members of different subject departments, so they are aware of the decisions, changes and choices being considered by senior managers, along with their colleagues. They can challenge decisions in public forums such as staff meetings or in-service professional development sessions – and may be expected to do this by their union members. They can also offer a union 'view' and 'position' having been briefed by their national leadership about policy reforms and on-going campaigns. In their union training, reps are encouraged to connect individual concerns to broader issues. For example, if they are dealing with an individual case of alleged bullying, they will try to explore how widespread such behaviour is. But, to return to some of the arguments presented above, not all oppositional behaviour constitutes 'resistance', particularly if resistance is taken as having what Giroux calls a 'revealing function, one that contains a critique of domination and provides theoretical opportunities for self-reflection and for struggle in the interests of self-emancipation and social emancipation' (Giroux, 1983, 109). Perhaps only a few of the concerns that members raise will generate this 'revealing function'. However, these sorts of everyday 'thin' resistances, such as the deflection of Learning Conversations at Atwood school, are part of the everyday life of schools constituting 'strategic skirmishes' (Ball, 2015, 3) and forms of transgression, refusal and critique.

From what they told us, we have grouped what the union reps identified as issues that were causing concern into three categories. However, this is an

heuristic device to start to think about in-school issues; in practice these concerns and instances of resistance overlap and are interwoven. First, we identified a set of low-level issues of the kind that will emerge as problems to be dealt with in most schools at some time. This category includes problems with student behaviour and how it is managed (or not) and disputes about room allocations or timetabling slots; these are re-occurring points of everyday conflict that make up the day to day concerns and micro-politics of many schools that can often be successfully managed or negotiated away. These points of struggle and conflict do not usually constitute resistance in Giroux's sense of the term –although these can sometimes escalate into focal points of opposition that have a revealing function and involve larger numbers of people.

The second cluster of concerns the reps identified related to aspects of in-school management, which tended to call up more oppositional stances in staffrooms. Here the reps identified what Neil in Wesley School referred to as 'calendar issues', and pressures that sometimes came as a consequence of calls for changes to established practices at short notice. Some of these concerns can and do overlap with the more mundane 'day to day' concerns. However, dimensions of this second cluster, such as the demands of performance management, issues of bullying and heavy workloads, will often resonate with teachers in other schools, as these are structural – part of the assemblage of neo-liberal, managerial school policies that are currently bearing down and re-working state schools as workplaces (Connell, 2009). It is in this second cluster that resistance in Giroux's sense may be more directly constructed and circulated.

For example, Neil's 'calendar' issues, where teachers were expected to do additional assessment-related work in a short period of time is an instance where these sorts of concerns may not always lead to much overt oppositional behaviour if senior management are able to respond quickly and at least show that they are listening and trying to be responsive to teachers' working conditions, 'buffering' aspects of policy overload in their schools (Ball, et al., 2012, 150). However, if they are not managed well, such concerns can escalate and lead to teachers withdrawing their good will – without which, no school can function efficiently or effectively. The withdrawal of good will where teachers threaten to 'work to rule' are examples of popular practices of oppositional behaviour (Chau, 2011, 193) – but are forms of resistances within accommodation. There is no strike, there is no overt 'uprising'; in contrast, these types of actions demonstrate the way in which power-relations work out in practice in 'the sphere in which they operate... as the process, which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them' (Foucault, 1978, 92).

In the third cluster we have grouped concerns that potentially have a wider socio-political reach; such as inequality in schooling, as well as proposed cuts to the state educational budget and loss of jobs. Here it might be expected that the teaching unions would unite to mount a defence of public education at a national level. According to Giroux, (1985, 111) whether any actions are classified as opposition or more overt resistance will depend on the degree to which the action 'contains the possibility of galvanising collective political

struggle around the issues of power and social determination' (Giroux, 1985, 111). This may well be better gauged over an extended period of time; the struggles over the provision for decent state schooling are certainly not over and, to borrow from Williams (1961), may be more accurately seen as part of a longer revolution.

All four reps talked about the way in which schools are under almost constant pressure to perform (Perryman, et al., 2011). Schools have to collect data and track student progress; this data is then used to audit student, teacher and school performance (Stevenson, 2017). This policy imperative is fed down to the school – onto the headteachers, through the senior leaders and into the classrooms. The pressure being experienced in schools is the result of policies informed by the ideology of 'deliverology' (Barber, et al., 2010). These pressures are also in some instances mediated by the vision and ambitions of individual headteachers.

Yeah. But what we're under the pressures of is central government, which says, "We want [inaudible] schools to do this, blah, blah, blah." Okay. But we're also under the influence of the individual members of the senior management team, who have their own visions about what they want to do, who are trying to implement whatever vision Ken (head teacher) has and whatever things they want to do to show that they're, you know, their own ambitions and so on, you know, their own ideas that they think should be put into place. So we're at the mercy of all of those. (Stewart)

The pressure to perform seeps into the very fabric of social relations in schools in ways that function to remake and rework teacher subjectivity. In the high-stakes, pressured environment of contemporary schooling, what it is to teach is under reconstruction, and what schools are and do is called into question. From what the reps reported, it was evident that some senior managers, attempting to enact contentious and/or high-stakes policies, were resorting to oppressive ways of exerting their power over the work of classroom teachers.

There has been at least one official complaint about the language that she used, the shouting, the hectoring, the disrespectful way in which she spoke to a teacher... I've had people who've not wanted to take it any further but are in tears about the way (the head) has spoken to them. (Frank)

This pressure surfaced in debates about what teachers were asked to do as well as how they were performing. Those teachers, who are perturbed or disturbed by performativity demands and accountability measures, might be more susceptible to what Bibby (2011, 139) calls 'the experience of the impossibility of policy ideals and the sheer hard work of living with them' that produce a set of 'psychic and social costs' that can be difficult for teachers to deal with.

The reps also talked about wider socio-political concerns. For example, Dave was anticipating cuts to the education budget.

First of all, I suppose, the worry will be loss of jobs but also the ability to do the job, if there's not enough money in the schools then people can't buy the things that they need, can't have the sort of facilities that they want. (Dave)

In a somewhat different vein, Frank and Stewart separately discussed how, in their view, schools were compounding class-related inequalities of access and attainment through grouping practices for teaching and through the pathways and routes that students were being steered towards.

Well, I think it's something which is so blatantly obvious to absolutely everybody, that all the kids in the bottom classes come from working class families and two-thirds of the kids in the top class come from middle class families... And I don't think it's not so much that nothing's done about it, it's just that the issues are so massive in the sense that until you get rid of the class difference in people's backgrounds what are you going to do? (Stewart)

We can see it, I can see it just by looking at those on free school meals, not that that's a complete indicator of class. They're all being steered off to hairdressing and car mechanics (Frank)

From our larger data set of ninety five interviews, few teachers expressed these sorts of concerns directly (although that may have been because of the questions we did and did not ask). Neil and Dave shared a similar outlook but it was Stewart and Frank who spoke unambiguously about class regimes in education policy and provision. They were aware of the contradictions that shape educational work and spoke explicitly about the politics of education. It was evident that they felt what Giroux (2012, 44) calls 'an acute sense of betrayal and moral indignation as the social state is dismantled' (Giroux, 2012, 44) that reflected 'a refusal on the part of teachers... to divorce education from both politics, authority, and matters of social responsibility' (Giroux, 2012, 121).

Policy work in school

When we asked the union reps about their in-school activities, such as those involving questioning, challenging and perhaps trying to change specific aspects of policy, they referred to various strands of policy that were high on the agenda in their schools. They discussed the complexities involved in different technologies of assessment, and the ways in which students were being grouped in order to meet targets. They talked a great deal about the 'outcomes' of various policies in terms of teachers conditions, including work intensification, and the pressure teachers were under, as previously discussed. However, in this section we want to raise two other related aspects of policy and policy contestation in schools that were articulated by the reps; first, the influential role of senior management in policy-making in school, and second, a question about how aspects of policy are currently being interpreted by some teachers. Here we are interested in the ways that 'the delicate mechanisms of

power' (Foucault, 2004, 34) work in schools and limit refusals and forms of resistance.

In all four schools, posts of responsibility had been created for key individuals (policy enthusiasts) who would be responsible for driving the translation of certain strands of policy. These posts attracted additional salary and additional non-contact time (i.e. less time in the classroom). Key policies such as behaviour management, assessment, attainment and professional development etc. became the province of certain individuals who often led teams responsible for making policies 'work' – for translating texts into practices. These policies were sometimes subject to and mediated by individual 'enthusiasts'. In his school (Campion) Dave recounted the sorts of difficulties stemming from such policy-enthusiasms which sometimes resulted in confusion for classroom teachers who were on the receiving end of contradictory recipes for action.

One of the things that we've had to talk to (the head) about is there was a perception, and I think it was more than a perception, that people on SLT were developing policies individually rather than collectively.... And because each senior manager had been given areas of their own responsibility, they were starting to take them a little bit more just as their province rather than just being their responsibility, if I can put it that way... And so people started to feel a little bit uneasy and didn't quite know what they were expected to do. You would get a different answer depending on who you asked the question of. (Dave)

We have argued elsewhere (Ball, et al., 2012, 49) that policy work can be taken up and embraced more for its career-enhancing potential than pedagogic potential. From what they said, our reps were also aware of this version of policy actor work in their school settings.

So what you get is they all are fairly ambitious, they've all got things they want to do, and the feeling from the heads of department last year was that all these initiatives were not about helping the kids, they're helping the school and it was all about putting something on their CV so that they could go for a promotion... it's a game that everyone plays. (Stewart)

We had asked all our respondents to list policies that they were aware of and that had implications for their professional work. We anticipated that the union reps would be more critical of general aspects of current educational policy such as the assessment regime and curriculum reforms in English secondary schools. However, and crucially, it is also the case that any responses to questions about policy (as well as resistance) will differ according to how 'policy' is being understood and constructed. If some practices have become normalised and part of the repertoire of teachers, then they may be less likely to cause discomfort or lead to any oppositional activity.

It depends what you mean by policy... So, for example, saying concentrate on the school's A to C, I don't necessarily see that as a policy, I see that as a general school across the board that's what we do, you know. ... But something about, let's say A to Cs, is so deeply

ingrained into just about everything that we do, whether it be concentrating on [inaudible] boosting classes or anything like that, it's a bit too general. If you were to ask someone they wouldn't even know, do you see what I mean? (Stewart)

As Foucault said, power relations 'end by forming comprehensive systems; the logic is perfectly clear, the aims decipherable, and yet it is often the case that no one is there to have invented them' (Foucault, 1978, 95). Here in what Stewart says, the logic of the A to C mindset, has become normalised and naturalised, a regime of 'truth', although its techniques and tools, the strategies and tactics that surround the A to C culture, are regarded as policy work. In terms of oppositional behaviours or antagonisms, it could be that (some) teachers regard the examinations culture as immutable – a system that is non-negotiable at least at the local level - thus, any opposition or resistance is directed towards the refinements of this policy rather than the central matter of the classification, labelling and dominant discourse of the examination system itself - a system that is non-negotiable, at least at the local level. This does not mean, however, that there is not a refusal of aspects of assessment technology (Neumann, et al. 2016).

Resistance to policy and 'wins' for the union

From our analysis of the reps interviews, we located a few accounts of instances of opposition that did lead to some union 'wins' in our schools. Neil gave an example where his own English department had refused to enact a non-compulsory assessment policy reform. Through careful and logical explanation of why the policy was not needed, the head was eventually persuaded to change his mind and his actions. However, his decision was also influenced by the fact that the department in question was highly effective and academically successful: 'he sort of trusts us because we've had good results for a long time'. (Neil)

In Dave's school, also through careful negotiation and discussion, the staff were able to exert pressure on the senior managers to be more pro-active about behaviour and discipline in the school and to take on a little more of the 'work' of behaviour management.

We went along and said, "Look, there aren't enough SLT on the ground. It would be nice if there were one or two patrolling the school from time to time, that sort of thing, to reinforce what's going on in the classroom." And he (the head) then discussed this with SLT and it was agreed that they would change their own timetables and relinquish some of their free time... so that they could get around the school and be a little bit more evident in the classroom. (Dave)

In both these cases, common-sense, discussion and a degree of negotiation produced positive outcomes. Perhaps these are examples where teachers have re-appropriated dominant discourses to their own ends – arguing that their ideas will be more effective in supporting successful outcomes in the school. But are

these examples of resistance, of refusal through the provision of positive alternatives, or merely accounts of problem-solving and micro-political disputes?

Neil recalled other instances where teachers had simply dug their heels in and refused to comply with a last-minute request for a meeting – a request that was not lawful (teachers do not have to attend meetings called at short notice). These are examples of ‘everyday resistance’ to what is perceived to be unfair – resistance to practices perhaps in Foucault’s terms. However, non-compliance and oppositional behaviour of this kind does not necessarily constitute a rejection of the school system and of national policy reforms; indeed, it may simply become a tactic to make life a bit better rather than being transformative in any major sense, as in the case of the ‘calendar issues’ that formed the focal point of refusals in Wesley School:

He (the head) tried to make everyone attend a health and safety meeting that he should have had earlier in the year. And we just absolutely said, no, you can’t just put a new date in the calendar at the last minute, people have got things to do. And so I just told the members to vote with their feet and not turn up and no one turned up, so he couldn’t have his meeting. And he was a bit annoyed about that but the fact is, that’s the law anyway. (Neil)

An account of a stronger challenge was described by Stewart. He gave an example of collective action that could have led to staff changes in the leadership team and bad publicity for the school, if it had been taken to the Local Authority or the local press. He described action that contained the potential for a ‘spectacular’ form of resistance.

So there was two big meetings with the [interruption] and, basically, a vote of no confidence, really, in the senior management team. It was very strong stuff, I’ve never seen it before in my... You know, people may have had little moans and gripes about particular people, but I’d never seen... to the extent of people putting their names to a piece of paper and, you know, what does that mean to, you know... You know, it takes a lot to get people wound up like that. (Stewart)

He highlighted what he saw as a central contradiction between schools as sites of an ethics of care and simultaneously hierarchical work-places that he thought accounted for why teachers might be slower to oppose and resist aspects of policy.

I think that there’s a problem with schools and the problem with schools is different from other organisations – probably charities is probably a similar situation – where we are seen as all being on the same side. And, if you were to work for British Telecom, they know their managers are managers and the workers are workers; Post Office and so on; there’s a clear class divide, whereas teaching is different because a lot of teachers don’t see those class divisions – or not class divisions as such, the power

divisions – because we’re all friendly and we’re all talking about kids or whatever. But those divisions are still there. (Stewart)

Power, schools and teachers

In this paper we have revisited the interviews that we conducted with the union reps in our case study schools, in order to re-consider a key question that was asked in our seminars and presentations: was there any resistance to the policy reforms that schools were being charged with putting into practice? Here we have detailed some of the forms of discomforts, oppositions and thin forms of resistances and refusals that were in play in these schools based on the accounts and perspectives of four organised teachers. We have connected these empirical instances to wider questions about how situated oppositions and resistances in schools can be best understood. One matter stands out: many small-scale conflicts that occur as part of the everyday micro-politics of schools can be resolved by in-school negotiations and bargaining and persuading conducted largely in interactions between the reps (buttressed by large in-school union memberships) and their headteachers. Whether or not these instances of opposition can effectively challenge some forms of in-school dominance or some aspects of controversial educational reforms, is questionable. It may not be possible for there to be full-blown resistance within an individual school setting, although the national unions have, at key junctures, mobilised their membership to fight some of the worst cuts in public welfare provision or to challenge educational policies that they see as unjust.

If resistances are in some part about revealing ‘spaces of doubt’ that may build up into actions for change, then there is a need to return to how power is understood and theorised. If those in positions of power are able to take pre-emptive measures to anticipate and reduce oppositions and challenges before they happen, this will have ‘fundamental consequences for the possibilities and tactics of resistance’ (Lilja and Vinthagen, 2014, 123) particularly in institutions like schools ‘where we are all seen as being on the same side’. However, as we have seen, power in schools is complex, mediated by different policy actors (in and outside schools) and takes a variety of forms. There are forms of power that are asserted in ways that leave little space for negotiation – mandated policies for example. In response, some school leaders may seek to persuade, to orchestrate consent and in doing so, avoid confrontation.

In schools, the management of consent is central to the successful operation of power/the school while simultaneously eroding teachers’ capacity to resist. Teachers can and do build relational forms of power through ‘everyday’ resistances such as humour, foot-dragging and the like. In the school setting teachers do have some channels for negotiation and they can withdraw their good will and ultimately their labour. They can also resign their posts. As we have seen in this paper, they do challenge some aspects of the neo-liberal teacher’s role – a differentiating curriculum, sorting and classifying students for example. As Stewart argues, being a teacher comes with a pre-formed notional identity of all working together for the good of the students and working for the

same (assumed) goals. What this may displace, however, are questions about how schools could be other.

If we were to be back in conversation with those critics who asked about our limited findings of refusals and oppositions, what would we now say to them? Quite evidently, it would be important to tease out how resistance and more properly resistances (and oppositions and refusals) are understood. There is a need for a more complex lexicon that traces the ambivalences and ambiguities that are involved in enacting and resisting education policy in schools. There is also a need to consider contextual specificity with more precision perhaps than we have done here; the specific history and culture of schools; specific policies; the specific power dynamics in play and the degree of capacity for fighting back on mandated policies - other than resignation. Hall and McGinty (2015, 13) argue that ‘theorizing and researching resistance at a time of widespread compliance... has become an urgent issue for educational researchers’. They add that there is a need to collate and disseminate evidence of what is being undertaken by those ‘who *are* engaging in activism as a means to challenge the dominant discourses embodied within the neoliberal approaches to educational policy’. We hope that to a small degree we have added to this evidence base.

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Table 1. Union Representatives (reps)

Union Representative	School and location
Stewart	Atwood School- inner city
Dave	Campion School- small county town
Frank	George Eliot - suburban
Neil	Wesley School -suburban